

## KENNETH H. CONNELL

1917-1973

*A Correspondent writes:*

**K**ENNETH CONNELL died in Belfast in September 1973 at the age of 56. Within Ireland he was probably the best known Belfast scholar in the broad field of Irish Studies, and outside Ireland almost certainly the most widely known living Irish historian. The work which first made his name was his classic *The Population of Ireland 1750-1845* published in 1950. Soon after its publication, in 1952, he was appointed to a lectureship in economic and social history in Queen's University, the first such post in Ireland to be filled by a professional economic or social historian. In the same year he was appointed external examiner to the NUI, a measure of how quickly and effectively his book in 1950 had put him as a comparative outsider to Ireland and a young scholar in an authoritative position in the field of Irish history. Subsequently he created in Belfast the first, and still the only, department of economic and social history within Ireland, and in 1970 he became the first president of the Economic and Social History Society of Ireland. Unlike many Irish university departments his department was never narrow or parochial: there was a constant stream of visitors to Belfast, both from the south and from Britain.

His publication was sparse: his study on population in 1950, a handful of papers for the most part closely related to the population issue, a further book entitled *Irish Peasant Society* in 1968 consisting of a collection of four essays of which only two had not been published previously. He was an extremely careful and scrupulous writer who devoted much time and pains to his writing: he did not write easily, but what he wrote was elegant and fastidious, very much like the man himself in dress and appearance.

The impact of his book on its appearance can be described as greater than that of any other book which has so far appeared in Irish economic and social history. Several sound books in Irish economic history had in fact appeared in preceding decades, but they were monographs dealing with narrow or confined topics. Connell's book was the first book by a professional economic historian to tackle a major theme affecting Irish society at large. For anyone studying economic and

social history with awakening interest to the appeal of the subject, Connell's book was a revelation and its influence profound. It was rigorous in structure, method and argument, and seemed to relate the fact of accelerated population growth to an analysis of deeper economic and social forces. Connell's scholarly discipline and power of logic were without parallel in previous Irish writing in economic and social history. The influence of the book on British demographic study was also considerable: Connell reappraised the importance of the birth rate in Irish population growth. He was ahead of general reappraisal in other countries of the birth rate as a factor in population growth, and was in fact, through the influence of his book, in part responsible for the interest in re-examination of the birth rate. Historians had long assumed that a decline in the death rate had been responsible for the accelerated population growth from the 18th century, and indeed the issue had for decades been regarded as effectively closed. Connell's book is therefore a seminal work in the now vast and expanding literature on population growth. Within the narrower field of Irish studies his standing has scarcely been less. His revision of the defective population estimates not only made Irish population growth intelligible and hence easier to account for in a scholarly manner, but the general economic and social framework implicit in his revised estimates has become the one within which all other Irish historians of the economic and social scene since then have worked. Moreover, in creating a demographic framework less fantastic than that suggested by earlier uncritical acceptance of contemporary population estimates, he left the door open for hypotheses to explain the growth alternative to his own hypothesis. He thus emerges, not only as the framer of the hypothesis of Irish population growth before the Famine, which has been most widely accepted, but as the catalyst of the quickening interest subsequently in Irish economic and social history generally, including theses at variance with his own basic hypotheses.

Despite his scholarship and persuasiveness, his work was itself characterised by some weaknesses. First of all his approach involved simplification of Irish history to simple elements, an eagerness to marry early induced by defined circumstances, the spread of a potato diet facilitating early marriage, a mercenary landlord system inducing a predisposition, through misery, to early marriage, and a special part played by the clergy, both in encouraging marriage in pre-Famine Ireland (or in discouraging it in post-Famine Ireland). On this basis, Connell erected an immensely persuasive and logically powerful case. He regarded it in his book as a hypothesis, but already he left himself open to the criticism of over-simplification. Moreover as time passed, his own views hardened, and what he had put forward as hypothesis originally he regarded as fact, and did not alter in any way in the light

of criticism. Secondly, he used few manuscript sources and was never seriously interested in the wide range of sources which exist in manuscript form. For much of his demographic study this is not a defect, because so much of the source material was in print. However, the lack of interest in manuscript sources reflected a third weakness in his approach. Ultimately, he was not seriously interested in the wider economic background or in matters such as trade and agriculture. His real interest lay in psychological motivations and in the immediate institutional or other influences that effected them. This emerges in *The Population of Ireland* in the importance given to marriage attitudes and to influences or institutions that play upon them. It comes out even more obviously in his later work which deals much more directly with psychological issues, and in pioneering fashion he was often proceeding into the study of deeper social and instinctual issues not readily documented in traditional historical sources. In this regard and in the use of novels or folk material, he was once again very much a pioneer in European academic history. The conclusions of his essay on "Catholicism and marriage in the century after the Famine" are perhaps controversial, but the scholarship of the essay was impeccable (a fact which its critics, however, attempted to challenge), and the method and approach for a study written in 1960-61 were highly original and fertile in the possibilities they opened for further investigation. Completely devoid of doctrinal or doctrinaire attitudes, he can be regarded as a precursor of the growing interest in the study of, for instance, *mentalites* evident in French social history. It was this field that really interested him, which gave him the greatest personal satisfaction, and in which he really excelled. In the wider study of Irish economic and social history, while his book acted as catalyst, it also, in some respects, made it difficult to break away from the simplified premises to which he had reduced the background: it required immense intellectual effort to make the break with the hallucinatory and logical power of his exposition.

As a man he was charming and hospitable, and he and his wife received many visitors to Belfast in their home. He also readily befriended students and young scholars. Having made their acquaintance he kept up contact with them and was generously a source of both sympathy and encouragement to them, one of his many endearing qualities. In personal relations with colleagues in the academic world, he was a loner, not a leader. He would indeed be pleased, but amused somewhat cynically, in seeing himself described or cast in the role of creator of a school. His interests in academic or controversial issues tended to be obsessive, just as his scholarly interests in their clear-cut identification and simplification suggest the same. He was often impish, easily teasing friends, and laughing at their reactions to his own persistence. This was very easy to take by those who

knew him in informal surroundings; it was more difficult to take in more impersonal dealings, especially by busy people who had as part of their responsibilities to balance other considerations as well. Inevitably he ran into difficulties within his Department, within his University and with some of his academic colleagues elsewhere. The toll of these disputes, already beginning to take up some of his time, in latter years was heavy emotionally on the man, and added to the personal worries which affect us all, made it increasingly difficult for him to concentrate on research and reading. The reverse side to these qualities was a rare, and to those who knew him, intensely warm personality, free from organisation mania, free from the urge to publish early or excessively, or the urge to domineer, sins which, one or other, cover almost the entire academic community.

Academic interpretations like the books that contain them and the flesh and blood that write them do not wear well with time. However, he wrote what was the first fully professional book in Irish economic and social history on a major theme with a central significance for the appreciation of pre-Famine Irish society. Time cannot deprive him of that standing in the intellectual development of the subject he loved so dearly. The discussion and controversies which have revolved around the book reflect in many ways its central position. Moreover, even those who disagree with some of his interpretations, accept the demographic framework which he suggested, and are therefore seeking to explain with alternative hypotheses, a general economic and social environment whose most essential parameter he created. In fleeting happier moments in recent years, at times when his worries abated, he spoke of how he was getting back to work, of his interest in several of the topics of psychological import closest to his heart, and of even how he thought that Irish population at the outset of the 18th century was probably larger than he had suggested in his classic estimate in 1950 (a subject which one would dearly like to have seen him develop). Given the promise which his first work held out, and which his subsequent writings maintained fully, one can only regret bitterly that he did not enjoy the tranquillity in later years or the long life necessary to continue his work. Taken away by death at a comparatively early age, of him more than most scholars, it can be said: *ars longa vita brevis*.